

The Lesson

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Summary: This is sort of a sequel to both Fear and Earthquake. A school shooting threatens to change the Camdens' lives forever.

The Lesson

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Author's Note: I got this story from reading the preview section in the TV GUIDE that this season they were going to tackle the issue of the Columbine shooting. That got me thinking of ways that they could do that. Parental caution is advised because this does deal with the issue of school violence. I do make reference to my other two stories, Fear and Earthquake, in this story so you may want to go back and read them if you haven't already done so._

****The Lesson****

****By: SparksJSH****

Mary Camden groaned as she leaned against her younger sister's locker. Lucy looked up at her and smiled. She took her Psych book from her locker and placed it on top of her notebook.

"What's wrong, Mary? You are a Senior; you're supposed to be on top of the world."

"You're right; I'm a Senior. I'm not supposed to be stuck in a class with my Freshman brother but unfortunately the counselor doesn't think that's a legitimate reason to change my schedule."

Lucy closed her locker and gave the combination lock a twirl. "That's what you get for putting off taking Keyboarding until your last year in school."

Mary frowned. "Is that what they teach you in Advanced Psych? How to kick someone while they are down?"

"Think of the positive side, Mary. You can make Simon do your homework for you."

A hint of a smile touched Mary's lips. "I hadn't thought of that. Thanks, Luce. See you after school."

Lucy nodded and headed up the stairs to her classroom. Unlike Mary, Lucy rather liked the idea that once again there were three Camdens in High School. It didn't hurt matters any that she was no longer the youngest one either. She wondered if it was a holdover from the robbery this summer that made her feel safer the more of her family that was around.

Stepping into her Psych class, Lucy noticed right off that the ten desks had been placed in a semicircle in viewing range of a TV/VCR. Mr. Carlton, her teacher smiled at her.

"Afternoon Lucy. How are you today?"

Lucy cocked her head to one side and grinned. Mr. Carlton was by far her most favorite teacher at the school. Part of the reason was that he was so friendly and helpful but the fact that he was young and handsome helped as well. "Why is it that whenever you ask me that, I can't be sure if you are asking for politeness sake or because you want to psychoanalyze me?"

Jason Carlton laughed. "Paranoia, perhaps? Maybe this should be the focus of our next class."

He waited until the other class members arrived and took their seats before beginning class. "We are going to watch a video today. I'm not going to tell you anything about it beforehand because I want us to be able to discuss your first gut reaction to what you see."

Without another word, Mr. Carlton pushed play on the VCR. The tape began with what looked like a school. Kids were milling around the courtyard talking.

Lucy was the first student to notice the guy in the background of the tape pull a gun from his trench coat. Her heart began to hammer as she broke out in a cold sweat. She found it becoming difficult to breathe.

Her classmates were oblivious to her discomfort and panic. They were wrapped up in what was happening on the TV. But Mr. Carlton was looking from student to student to gauge their reaction to the violence on the tape. When he finally looked to Lucy, he could immediately tell something was seriously wrong.

He rushed to her desk and with firm but gentle pressure pulled Lucy's hands away from her face. "Dylan, stop the tape. Angela, go get some wet paper towels from the bathroom. Lucy, you are hyperventilating. Take slow deep breaths."

Lucy could hear him over the roar in her ears and tried to do as he said. As her breathing returned to normal, she became acutely aware that everyone in the classroom was staring at her. Turning bright red

with embarrassment, Lucy looked around for an escape but the path to the door was blocked. Instead, she buried her head in her arms on the desk.

Mr. Carlton recognized her embarrassment and looked to the rest of the class. "I want all of you to go down to the library for the rest of the class period. If anyone gives you any trouble about being in the hall, have them buzz me."

Once he was alone with Lucy, he returned his full attention to her. "You okay, Lucy? Do you want me to get your sister or call your parents for you?"

Lucy shook her head no. The last thing she wanted was for them to worry about her again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to react like that."

Mr. Carlton smiled. "The funny thing about reactions is that we usually can't control them. I'm sorry, Lucy. I didn't mean to upset anyone this much. Would you like to talk about it?"

Lucy turned her head slightly so that she could see him. "This summer I was in Thompson's Grocery when it was robbed. I guess seeing the kid on the tape with a gun brought all that back."

Jason Carlton hung his head. "I should have thought to ask last class meeting if anyone had had any traumatic experiences such as that. I can't apologize enough for bringing back bad memories for you."

Wiping her eyes with the back of her hands, Lucy realized she was still shaking. "I thought I was over this. I even quit seeing Dr. Shell last month because I wasn't having nightmares and I no longer freeze up every time I first enter a store. I am so embarrassed. Everyone must think I'm such a geek."

"Lucy, this is the second year I've had you in class so I think I know you pretty well. You are a bright, sensitive, caring individual. That would have been a hard video for you to watch even if you hadn't been through a robbery. Never apologize or be embarrassed about being affected by what you see. It's what makes you who you are."

Lucy forced a little smile. "Thanks."

"No problem. Now, I have a bathroom back in my office. Why don't you go wash your face? After that if you want to talk about what happened we can or I can go round up the class."

"Go on and round the class back up. It's probably better if I go ahead and explain to them what happened before it spreads around school and Mary and Simon hear about it."

"If you are sure. But if you ever need to talk my door is always opened."

"I'll remember that, thanks." On shaky legs, Lucy walked back to the office bathroom. Closing the door behind her, she leaned against it for a minute before turning the faucet on. She splashed her face lightly with cool water.

Dimly over the sound of running water, Lucy thought she heard gunshots. Had Mr. Carlton turned the tape back on for some reason? Lucy shut off the water and grabbed a paper towel.

She had barely stepped out of the teacher's office when Mr. Carlton staggered up to her. The first thing she noticed was a bright red patch on his chest and then the pain on his face. Lucy paled and opened her mouth to scream.

Jason Carlton clamped his hand quickly over her mouth before she could utter a sound. He had more strength than a man who had just been shot should have. He bent close to her ear.

"Hush, Lucy, and listen to me. There's someone with a gun out there. I don't know how many gunmen there are but you have to get to safety. Go back to the bathroom and lock yourself in. Stay there no matter what happens and do not make a sound. Understand?"

Frightened Lucy nodded. With a silent prayer that she wasn't so scared that she would scream anyway, Mr. Carlton lowered his hand. Lucy took a deep breath. "Aren't you going to hide with me?"

"No, I've been seen so they'll be looking for me but they won't know you are in here if you go hide now. Now please go and do as I asked, Lucy. Please."

Reluctantly, Lucy nodded and, her legs still shaking, returned to the bathroom. After she locked the door, she wedged herself into the corner using the toilet to hide her.

She covered her head with her arms, her whole body shaking uncontrollably. Almost immediately she heard more gunshots, closer this time. She pressed her hands tightly against her ears to block the sound and used her knee to cover her mouth to ward off the screams that were building in her throat.

Footsteps crept closer. Lucy said a silent prayer that it was Mr. Carlton coming to tell her everything was okay. The doorknob jiggled and she heard a voice curse on the other side. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized it wasn't Mr. Carlton. Was she about to be discovered?

As Lucy's class was gathering to watch the video, Mary was slumping in her seat ready for Keyboarding to be over. She still couldn't believe she was going to be stuck for a whole semester in the same class as her younger brother.

It didn't help that Simon seemed to love the idea. Even now as he came into class he grinned as if happy to see her. She glared at him hoping he would take a hint and leave her alone. He didn't.

"Hey, Mary, how's your day been?"

"Great until now. Look, Simon, it's just not cool for a Senior to be seen talking to a Freshman even if he's her brother. So why don't we make the best of the situation and ignore each other in class. Okay?"

Simon's grin faded and was replaced by a hurt expression on his face that Mary refused to notice. "Yeah, sure, whatever you

say."

Crestfallen, Simon found a seat at a computer on the other side of the room. Now he had an idea of how Ruthie felt whenever he brushed her off. He promised himself that he would make plans to do something with his younger sister as soon as they got home from school.

As soon as the teacher began class, Simon pushed aside his hurt to concentrate on what the teacher was lecturing about. It was mostly stuff he already knew because he was good with computers but he still wanted to do his best. He secretly hoped that maybe Mary would end up needing his help and therefore be forced to acknowledge him.

Ten minutes into class the door opened and a guy Simon recognized as a football player walked in. The teacher looked at the student, obviously irritated by the interruption. "Young man, don't you know how to knock?"

"This gives me permission to do what I want to do when I want to." Several girls screamed as he held up an ominous looking handgun. He pulled the trigger and the teacher fell to the ground. "Now then, where is the person I'm looking for? Mary Camden, where are you?"

Simon fearfully glanced over at his sister who looked just as frightened. He held his breath as she slowly stood. Was she crazy? She should be hiding not helping him.

"Why are you doing this, Tony?" Her voice only slightly betrayed her fear.

"You refused to go out with me last year. I guess you could say I don't handle rejection well. Now you have to pay for that." Turning the gun on her, he prepared to pull the trigger. Mary braced herself but was surprised when Simon jumped in front of her just as the gun fired. Stunned, Mary caught Simon as he fell, a patch of red already bright against his yellow shirt. Tears flooded her eyes as she held him close. Simon groaned.

"Shh, don't move, Simon. I'll get you some help as soon as I can." She looked up at Tony. "How could you? How could you shoot my brother? I'm glad I didn't go out with you. If my brother dies..."

Tony laughed. "Don't be so melodramatic, Camden. Your brother is fine. It's a paint gun."

Simon groaned again as he opened his eyes. "Still packs a wallop though."

The teacher was also sitting up. "Mr. Johnson, I don't care if you are a big shot on the football team, coming in here with a paint ball gun is going to land you in hot water. You will probably be expelled for this."

Tony quit laughing and paled. "Expelled? Kevin didn't say anything about that. He said it was just a prank that would make everyone laugh. We wanted to do something that would make everyone ready for the game Friday night. Practically the whole team is doing this right now."

"Look around, Tony. Do you see anyone laughing?" Mary almost growled.

From down the hall came the sound of more shots. These sounded different than the pings they had heard from Tony's gun. The teacher looked at the football player.

"Those are real bullets being fired out there, Mr. Johnson. Someone isn't taking this as a prank."

"But Kevin said it was all a joke." Tony threw down his paint ball gun and ran from the classroom before anyone could stop him.

The students looked to their teacher for direction. He sighed and pulled himself painfully to his feet. Simon could sympathize. For a small ball of paint, it had made his whole chest hurt.

"I would suggest we go out these windows but with the bars we wouldn't be able to get out. Those bars might prevent people from coming in and stealing the computers but they won't let us out either. Why don't we slip into the next room through the connecting door and go out those windows. Everyone stay together so we can account for everybody once we are safe."

Mary helped Simon to his feet. There was so much she should tell him but didn't know where to begin. So instead she hugged him tightly. Simon returned the hug and looked back at the door.

"I hope Lucy is okay."

"Me too. Maybe Tony was right and this was all some sort of stupid prank."

"Some prank." Simon retorted but he hoped Mary was right.

Matt threw on his brakes and looked across the seat to his girlfriend Shana. "Did I hear that news report right?"

Shana nodded and looked at him fearfully. "We better get to your house quick."

Matt was glad there were no officers on the road for the two miles he had to cover to get to his childhood home. Pulling into the driveway, Matt was glad to see his father was home as well.

Both Matt and Shana rushed into the house to find Annie and Eric on the floor playing with the twins. They looked up, surprised to see the young couple. That surprise quickly turned to alarm when they saw the look of fear in Matt and Shana's eyes.

"Mom, Dad, we just heard on the radio that there have been shots fired at the high school. They don't know what's going on but the news said there have been confirmed injuries."

Eric gripped Annie's arm. "Come on, let's get down there."

"I'll stay here with the twins." Shana volunteered.

"Thanks. Matt, will you go to the Elementary and pick up

Ruthie?"

"It won't do any good for me to go there. The other schools are on lock down. They aren't letting anyone in or out. I'm going with the two of you."

The ten minutes it took for Eric to drive to the high school were the longest ten minutes of Annie's life. It reminded her of the terror she felt while Lucy was being held hostage during the summer. Knowing that three of her kids were possibly in danger was even worse.

Eric parked as close as he could and the three Camdens joined the rest of the people who were gathered near the police line. Eric could hear a policeman shouting directions at them through a megaphone.

"People, please calm down. We have evacuated most of the students and have bused them down the street to the Junior High Gym. We have a list of those students that we will read in just a moment. But first let me give you a brief rundown on what has happened."

Annie gripped Eric's arm. All she wanted was to hear the list and know that her children were safe. Anything else could wait. Matt hovered protectively behind her.

"Approximately one hour ago at least ten students opened fire on classmates. While most were using paint ball guns that caused no serious injuries, at least one gunman was using real weapons. We transported six students and four teachers to the hospital with gunshot wounds. Because a few of the gunmen may still be at large in the school, we cannot determine if there are any students still inside that may be wounded or worse."

The officer passed the megaphone to an older woman holding a clipboard. "I'm Mrs. Casey, secretary here at the high school. I'm about to read you a list of students who were taken to the gym at the Junior High. Students signed in as they entered so this list is in no particular order."

The secretary began calling out the list. Everyone who was gathered, the Camdens included, listened intently, hoping to hear the names of their loved ones be called. About midway down, Mary and Simon's names were called out. Annie all but collapsed against Eric in relief but continued to listen for Lucy's name to be called as well. Before she heard it, the secretary paused.

"That's the end of the list of students at the gym. I will now read the names of the students transported to the hospital."

Matt turned away. He so wanted to hear Lucy's name but he didn't want her to be injured. But Lucy's name was not on that list either.

The officer took the megaphone back. "Please, we ask you to please go to the Junior High gym at this time. Even if you didn't hear your child's name called it is the best place for you to wait. As we locate students we will be sending them there. We will also be updating the injured list at that site."

Tears in his eyes, Eric turned to Annie and Matt. "I guess we need to go to the gym. Mary and Simon must be scared."

"What about Lucy?" Annie glanced back at the school.

It was on the tip of Matt's tongue to say that she was probably scared too but thought better of it. "You heard him, Mom. Lucy will join us there real soon."

The scene at the gym was tense. Pockets of students were huddled about, some angry, most frightened, all crying. Teachers went from group to group checking on everyone but it was clear they were as shell-shocked as everyone else was.

When the first parents arrived, the emotions shifted slightly to relief of being reunited. Students who normally wouldn't be caught dead being seen with their parents, rushed into welcomed arms. There were no dry eyes in the gym.

Mary and Simon sat at the end of one of the bleachers holding one another. They had already searched the crowd out and had been disappointed not to find Lucy anywhere. Simon saw Matt first and pulled Mary to her feet. His chest was still sore from the paint ball but he was so glad to be alive that he didn't care about the pain.

"Matt!"

Soon the five reunited Camdens were hugging each other tightly. Annie paled however when she saw the red stain on Simon's shirt. Fresh tears filling her eyes, she pulled him close again.

"Relax, Mom, it's paint. Have you heard anything about Lucy?"

Eric shook his head. "What happened, guys?"

Mary shuddered. "It's all so confusing. According to Tony Johnson, it was only supposed to be a stupid prank but someone had real guns. I've never been so scared in my life."

Annie held her daughter close for a moment. Then Mary stiffened. "Dylan."

The tall handsome boy who had just entered the gym stopped when Mary called his name. His hands were thrust deep in his pockets and he had the same shocked expression on his face that everyone seemed to be wearing. He joined the Camdens.

"Hey, Mary."

"Dylan, you were in Advanced Psych with Lucy. Did she come out with you? We can't find her."

Dylan shifted uncomfortably. "I wasn't in the room at the time. Mr. Carlton sent all of us to the library where he could talk to Lucy."

Annie frowned. "Why?"

"We started watching this film; it was security video from that shooting in Waynechester last year. Lucy freaked out about it and began to hyperventilate and everything. Mr. Carlton was trying to

calm her down. I can't believe this happened not ten minutes after we started to watch that film. Talk about weird." He began to shake.

Eric hugged the boy to calm him down. "Where are your parents, son?"

"My dad won't get in from a business trip until late tonight and my mom died ten years ago."

Eric's heart went out to the boy. It was horrible enough to go through a tragedy like his but even worse without the support of parents. "Why don't you get signed in and come wait with us. We're going to be here for awhile until we hear something about Lucy."

"Thank you sir, but I think I'm going to see if I can find a phone and call my aunt. If she's heard the news she's probably worried. I hope Lucy is okay."

As the teen walked over to the sign-in table, Eric saw Sgt. Michaels come in. He excused himself and joined his friend in the doorway. The police officer shook the preacher's hand.

"Your kids okay, Eric?"

"Mary and Simon are but we haven't seen Lucy. What's going on at the school?"

"They've arrested eleven boys, all football players. Only one had real weapons, Kevin Cornwall. He claims he's also planted bombs around the school. The bomb squad is checking it out now."

Eric paled. "Bombs, but you'll get the rest of the kids out before any go off, won't you?"

Sgt. Michaels frowned. "Eric, by all out indicators, we've gotten everyone out that is capable of walking out."

"Lucy is still alive and uninjured. I can't believe anything else."

"I hope and pray you are right, Eric, and there is an excellent chance she is. We found out that some of the first kids who escaped the building ran to safety before they started busing kids here. They went to neighboring houses and buildings to escape the shootings. Maybe Lucy is one of those. She may even be back at your house now. Eric, I know you are worried about Lucy and I probably shouldn't even say this right now but everyone here is hurting. They could use a pastor right now."

Eric sighed. "You're right, I'll do what I can. But first, Ruthie is still at the Elementary. When will they let us pick her up?"

"Word just came down that they will now begin releasing students as parents arrive to get them."

"I'll send Annie and the kids to get her. Then they can go home and see if Lucy is there or has checked in. I'll stay here and see what I can do to help."

"Thanks Eric. I have to get back over to the school. If I find out anything I'll let you know. But to be honest, I doubt any information I get will be good news."

Sgt. Michaels made it back to the school just in time for the briefing. He stood by as his captain addressed them. "Okay, men. The Bomb Squad dogs that were sent in haven't found any traces of bombs in the building so we believe the suspect's claim was bogus. According to the principal, we have fifty students and one teacher unaccounted for. Hopefully, most of those students went somewhere besides the gym and just haven't reported in yet. But we know some of them are still in the building dead or injured. We have to search the entire building. If you find anything, radio in."

The officers fanned out as they entered the building. Sgt. Michaels and Officer Ricks headed upstairs. Entering one classroom, they found a male teacher lying face down on the floor. They carefully rolled him over and Sgt. Michaels felt for a pulse.

"He didn't have a chance." Sgt. Michaels shook his head. "Looks like he was shot first with a paint ball and then with a gun. Look back in that office to see if anyone else is there while I radio this in."

Officer Ricks nodded and moved back to the office. He saw nothing out of the ordinary but then his eyes rested on he closed door to the side of the office. He tried the handle but it was locked. He knocked on the door.

"Anyone in there?" Receiving no answer, he rejoined Sgt. Michaels in the classroom. "There's a locked door in there but nobody answered. Should we break the door in to be sure?"

"I can't see the perp going to the trouble of locking a body inside. Come on, let's go. The coroner will come in and get the body soon."

Officer Ricks followed behind him until they reached the doorway to the next classroom. "Sgt., I have a feeling about that locked room. Mind if I check it out anyway?"

"Chief Lansing to Sgt. Michaels."

He frowned and keyed his radio. "Go ahead, Chief."

"A student just reported that he left his backpack in the ecology lab upstairs where you are. He has medication in there that he must have. Can you locate the backpack and bring it down. The student claims it's easy to find. It's the only neon orange bag in the room."

"On my way sir." He turned back to Ricks. "Go on and check it out if it will make you feel better. I'll go find the backpack."

Officer Ricks returned to the room. He hated to disturb the body but he carefully picked up the keys lying right next to the teacher. Returning to the locked door, he tried each key until he found the one that worked.

He swung the door opened and flipped on the light. A quick glance

told him it was a bathroom. He was about to leave out when he noticed her out of the corner of his eye. Huddled in the dark safety of the furthest corner and deathly still was a young girl.

He knelt in front of her and was relieved to find that she was alive. "Honey, it's okay. You're safe now. I'm Officer Ricks with the Glen Oak Police Department. Are you okay?"

The girl didn't move a muscle. He realized she must be in deep shock. Rather than waste time waiting for an ambulance to bring up a stretcher and without bothering to radio in, Officer Ricks picked her up. Her body remained rigid and curled but she was surprisingly light.

Deeply concerned about her, Officer Ricks continued to reassure her that everything was fine as he raced down the hall and down the stairs. He burst from the building and began calling for a stretcher.

Within minutes, Paramedics had the unknown girl strapped, still curled up, to a stretcher. Loading her into the back of the ambulance, they sped away toward Glen Oak Memorial Hospital. Officer Ricks watched as they left and hoped the girl would be okay.

"Lucy."

Lucy didn't want to look around. Didn't want to be reminded of the nightmare going on around her. She tightened the huddle she had on herself. A warm gentle hand touched her shoulder and a feeling of peace ran through her body.

"Come on, Squirt. Don't be afraid of me."

Almost against her will, Lucy looked up and around. She was in a bare white room that seemed to go on forever. She was no longer wearing the yellow jumper dress she had worn to school that day but was now wearing a long white dress. A boy her age was standing beside her.

He was dressed in a white T-shirt and white slacks. He had hair the same color as hers and was almost a younger version of Eric Camden.

"You look like my dad." Lucy whispered softly.

The boy smiled. "You think so? I always thought I favored Mom more but I do think I have Dad's eyes."

Lucy frowned. "Who are you?"

"How quickly they forget. You share a tiny womb with someone for nine months, you'd think they'd remember you for always. I'm your twin, Lucy."

"Luke?" Lucy blinked a couple of times. She had been eight years old when her parents admitted to her that she had had a twin brother who had died not long after birth.

"The one and only, Squirt."

"I'm dead, aren't I? The gunman got into the bathroom and shot me, right?"

Luke knelt beside her and squeezed her hand. "You're not dead, Lucy. Your mind just checked out of reality for a little while. Things were too intense at the school."

"You know what happened?" Lucy knew it should feel weird sitting here talking to the twin brother she had never met but instead it felt right and peaceful.

"Sure. I've watched everything that has happened."

"Are Mary and Simon okay?"

"They are fine, worried about you and upset by what happened but fine."

Lucy relaxed only the slightest. She began to shake, a delayed reaction to everything that was happening. Tears filled her eyes.

"Luke?"

"Yeah, Squirt?"

"Will you hold me?"

He smiled and caressed her cheek before wrapping his arms around her. "I thought you would never ask."

Shana looked up as the front door opened. She was relieved to see Mary and Simon enter with Annie right behind them. Matt followed her in, carrying a subdued Ruthie. When it became evident that Eric and Lucy weren't with them, Shana frowned. "Where's...?"

For the first time since Shana met her, Annie actually looked every bit her age. The worried mother frowned. "I take it that means Lucy hasn't shown up here or called."

Shana shook her head. "Everyone else has called though. Your dad and Ginger called not long after you left. The Colonel called next. I think they all saw it on CNN or something. Julie and Hank called a few minutes ago. Everyone was worried and wanted someone to call and let them know that things were okay."

Annie nodded. "How are the boys?"

"They've been angels. I know you are worried about Lucy but I'm sure she's fine. According to the news, several students got out of the school and ran to places other than the gym. They were asking the students who did that to call the police department or to check in at the gym so they could be accounted for. I'm sure Lucy will check in soon."

Annie nodded. She was grateful for Shana's attempt to reassure her. But she knew her daughter better than just about anyone. Lucy would have immediately called home if she could. She glanced over at Mary and Simon. Surprisingly, they were sitting close together on the

couch. She was willing to bet there was more to their story than they had told them.

"Mary, Simon, are you two sure you are okay?"

Mary teared up. She thought about how scared she had been when Simon jumped in front of her. Before she could control herself, she doubled over on the couch and began to sob. Annie went to her side and held her tightly, ruffling Simon's hair in the process.

Matt released Ruthie and joined Shana on the floor with the twins. Ruthie went to Simon and snuggled close to him. She didn't completely understand what was going on but she could tell everyone was scared and upset.

The phone rang and everyone jumped. With a silent prayer that it would be Lucy, Matt grabbed up the cordless. "Hello?...Hi, Dad... No, she's not here and she hasn't called... Really? Are you up for that?... Okay, I'll tell her. Bye, Dad."

"What did your dad have to say?" Annie asked as she continued to hold Mary.

"He was checking on Lucy and he wanted to let us know they are having a prayer service at the church in an hour. He'll be leading it."

Simon frowned. "How could he? Lucy might be dead and he's leading a service. Doesn't he care?"

"Of course Daddy cares. Maybe Lucy needs our prayers right now." Ruthie suggested. Simon frowned and pushed off the couch. As he stormed out of the room, Ruthie's lower lip began to quiver. Matt moved to the couch and pulled Ruthie in his lap.

"Don't take it personally, Ruthie. It's been a long day."

"If all of you want to go, I'll watch the twins again and field phone calls." Shana offered.

"Thanks, Shana. I appreciate it but I think we all need to be there, the twins and you included. I'm going to use the phone in the study to return those calls and then I'm going to check on Simon." Annie motioned for Shana to take her place with Mary.

She waited until she was safely behind the closed door of the study before she allowed her own tears to fall. What she wouldn't give to have her mom there to hold and comfort her right then.

Picking up the phone, she dialed Julie's number first. She knew she would have to be in better control of her emotions before she talked to Eric's father. Julie picked up on the first ring.

"Julie, it's Annie."

"Thank goodness. I've been worried sick. How are the kids?"

"Mary and Simon are fine. But Julie, nobody's been able to find Lucy."

"But she's got to be okay. I won't believe anything else."

"I don't want to believe anything worse either but I'm scared. Why haven't we heard from her? She was just getting over the robbery and now this. We were so fortunate before, what if we're not this time?"

"Lucy will be fine, Annie. Do you need Hank and I to come over?"

"Eric's doing a prayer service in a little bit. We're all going to that if you want to come."

"We'll be there. Is there anything we can do besides pray?"

Annie hesitated. She knew one thing Julie could do but she hated to ask it of her sister-in-law. She took a deep breath and plunged on. "Will you call the Colonel for me?"

"No need. He called me after he talked to Shana. He and Mom were about to catch a flight here. I tried to get them to wait but they were worried after seeing the news."

Annie sighed. The last thing Eric or the kids needed right then was the Colonel but she knew how much he and Ruth really loved the kids. "That's okay, Julie. Hopefully, we'll have really good news by the time they get here."

"Of course we will. Want me to call your dad and Ginger?"

Annie sighed. What had she ever done to deserve such a great sister-in-law? "That would be wonderful Julie. But I wouldn't be surprised if they were on their way as well."

"I'll call anyway. Hank and I will see you at the church."

"Thanks Julie." Annie hung up the phone and sighed. With the calls taken care of, all that remained was checking on Simon. She wasn't sure if she could come up with the words to comfort him.

"Mom?" Simon stood in the doorway of the study. He had changed out of the paint-splattered shirt into a clean one.

Annie motioned for him to come in and hugged him tightly. "Oh, Simon, I wish I could turn back time and prevent today from happening."

"Mom, I'm not going to the service. I can't sit there while Dad pretends everything is fine as he comforts everyone else."

Annie shook his shoulders gently. "Simon, Lucy will be found and she'll be all right. Meanwhile, your dad is just as worried about Lucy as we are but he can't turn his back on everyone else. He knows that it is times like this when people have to pull together and support each other." She looked him over carefully. "I won't make you go but I really think you should."

Simon frowned. "What if I'm mad at God right now for letting this happen. It doesn't seem right to pray to him if I'm mad at him."

Annie hugged him. "Oh, Simon. God didn't let his happen. It doesn't work that way. And being angry isn't going to help bring Lucy back but it would help to have everyone pulling together. Will you please do it for your father and me?"

Simon sighed. "Okay, for you and Dad."

"Good news, men." Chief Lansing told his reassembled men. "Out of the fifty kids we had unaccounted for, forty have called and checked in. Now the bad news, besides the teacher that Sgt. Michaels and Officer Ricks found, we've found five more bodies. That leaves only five still unaccounted for, one being the Jane Doe Officer Ricks found."

"Jane Doe?" Sgt. Michaels looked back at Ricks. He had personally checked each of the bodies that were found and had been relieved that none had been Lucy. But he hadn't heard about a Jane Doe.

"Yeah, can you believe it? Remember that locked door I wanted to check? There was a girl hiding inside a bathroom. The poor kid was majorly in shock. The Paramedics transported her still huddled up. I couldn't even see her face."

Sgt. Michaels began to get excited. "What color hair did she have?"

"Honey colored, she was a real small thing too."

"I think I may know who she is. Her family will be relieved if it is. I have to get to the hospital and see if it's her."

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight. Today has been the worst day our community has ever faced and things won't improve overnight. Chief Lansing has promised to do his best to check in with us and give us an update as soon as he can. I can tell you that the six students and four teachers who were transported to the hospital are in stable condition and the doctors do not believe their injuries to be life threatening."

There were audible sighs of relief around the congregation but Eric could only find hollow satisfaction in the news. Until he knew for sure Lucy was safe like Mary and Simon, he would continue to feel hollow.

"What about your daughter, Rev? Has she been found yet?" Mr. Thompson asked from his pew near the front of the church.

Eric wasn't surprised. The grocer had always had a soft spot for the Camden kids but Lucy had quickly become even more special after the robbery. Eric could feel tears welling up in his eyes as he glanced at the rest of his family on the front pew.

"No, we haven't heard anything yet. But we are hopeful she is okay and will be reunited with us shortly."

"How, Reverend?" This time, Eric didn't recognize the man who had spoken. "How can any of us have any hope when things like today happen. No where is safe anymore."

Eric took a deep breath. "I have to have hope because the alternative is just too terrible to contemplate otherwise. Now I think we should say a prayer."

Eric prayed for the families who had lost people and for the students and teachers who had been injured. He thanked God for keeping as many students that were unharmed safe. He ended by asking God to watch over the students who were still missing.

When he said Amen, Annie opened her eyes and was surprised to see Sgt. Michaels kneeling beside her. He smiled.

"We found Lucy. She wasn't injured but she is in shock. She's at Glen Oak Memorial."

Relieved Annie hugged him tightly and looked to Eric. By the smile on her face he knew that the news was good. Silently he said another prayer of thanksgiving. But now he faced the problem of what to do about the service. But it was quickly taken from his hands. Reverend John Hamilton, his longtime friend, stood up from his seat two rows behind Annie.

"Eric, I'm going to go out on a limb and presume that Sgt. Michaels' presence and the look of relief on your face means that there is word about Lucy. Go with your family. I'll take over here if no one minds."

"Thanks, John." Eric smiled. He wasted no time joining Annie and the rest of the family. Moments later, Eric, Annie, Mary, Simon, Ruthie and the twins were in the van headed for the hospital. Julie, Hank, Matt, and Shana followed close behind them.

Eric glanced over at Annie. Despite her obvious relief that Lucy was alive, there was still worry etched around her eyes. He frowned and made sure the kids weren't listening.

"What's wrong, Annie."

"Sgt. Michaels said that Lucy was in shock."

"Of course she is. Mary and Simon normally take everything in stride but look at what today did to them. Lucy is an emotional person; she's just getting over the robbery and according to what Dylan told us about her last class, she was already upset by the video. I'm sure by now she's a basket case. You remember how upset she was after the robbery. But she'll be fine."

"I'm sure you're right." Annie forced a smile. But deep in her heart she was afraid that things were more serious than that.

"Luke?" Lucy gripped her twin brother's arm tighter. "Something's happening. I feel weird."

"Relax, Squirt. You're safe. A police officer found you and they took you to the hospital. Remember I told you that your mind checked out of reality for awhile; well, because of that your body isn't receiving any voluntary commands from your brain."

"I'm a vegetable?"

Luke laughed. "Actually I think the term is catatonic. You feel weird because the doctors have given you muscle relaxants. Your body is stiff and tense and they want you to relax."

"Are Mom and Dad with me yet?"

"Not yet, but it shouldn't be too much longer."

"Luke?"

"Yeah, Squirt?"

"Mr. Carlton, is he...?"

Luke sighed. "Lucy, don't ask."

Her face fell as tears filled her eyes. His lack of an answer was enough of an answer to tell her what she didn't want to know. He held her close as she began to sob. "Was he the only one?"

"Don't do this to yourself, Lucy. This place is supposed to help you not hurt you."

"Please, Luke, I have to know."

"Five students were killed."

Lucy went as pale as her dress and went limp in Luke's arms. He gave her a little shake. "Don't wig out on me here, Lucy. If you lose it here and retreat even further, I can't guarantee that we can get you back. That's why I didn't want to tell you. Please Lucy, stay here with me."

Lucy didn't answer him but continued to hold him tightly as she sobbed. Unsure of what else to do for her, Luke continued to hold her. He only hoped she wouldn't slip away from him.

"Reverend and Mrs. Camden, I'm Dr. Styles, ER Physician. I understand you are our Jane Doe's parents."

Eric frowned. "Jane Doe, what are you talking about? Where's Lucy?"

"Why don't the two of you come with me and I'll explain everything."

Frightened, Annie handed Sam off to Julie. Eric wrapped his arm around her shoulders for support as they followed the doctor into a conference room. He motioned for them to sit.

"Your daughter was brought in with a case of deep shock. She had no ID on her. We didn't know who she was until Sgt. Michaels came in and recognized her."

Eric gripped Annie's hand tightly. "She couldn't tell you her name?"

"Reverend Camden, Lucy is in what we call a catatonic state. She's conscious but unresponsive. Physically we can find nothing wrong with her. I would like to call in a Psych Consult."

"Lucy was in a robbery this summer. Up until last month she was seeing Dr. Olivia Shell."

Dr. Styles nodded. "I know her well. I'll call her in since she is familiar with Lucy. Now I know you are anxious to see your daughter so I'll let you both go in, just for a few minutes though. Then I'll have her moved up to a room where you can all visit. Talk to her. Maybe you can get her to respond."

Annie nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Styles."

Annie thought she was prepared to see Lucy. She would be strong and reassure her daughter that everything would be okay. But one look at the fifteen-year-old and Annie was grateful for Eric's strong arms holding her up.

Soft cloths secured Lucy's arms to the sides of the bed and her feet to the foot railing. Her eyes were open but were devoid of any expression. A single tear running down her pale cheek was the sole trace of emotion.

Eric glanced at the doctor. "Why is she restrained?"

"When she was brought in she was all curled up. We tried to straighten her out but she kept automatically returning to that position. We didn't want to take any chances with her muscles locking in that position."

"Unstrap her."

"But Reverend..."

"I said unstrap her. I don't want my daughter strapped to her bed like she's some prisoner. She's been through a very traumatic ordeal, she doesn't need this added to it."

The doctor sighed. "Fine, if you insist but I must insist on leaving the restraint on the hand that has the IV. We wouldn't want her to pull it out."

"Whatever, just remove the others."

Annie took Lucy's hand in her own and gave it a squeeze. "Lucy, we're here, Sweetie, and you are safe. Come back to us."

But Lucy's hand remained slack. Annie glanced back at Eric as the doctor unfastened the straps on Lucy's feet and right hand. To his surprise, she didn't move at all. He frowned.

"For some reason, it seems like she's slipped further away. Whatever you do, don't mention what happened today. Keep everything light and cheerful when you talk to her. The nurse will let you know when we are ready to move her to a room."

Lucy looked around, alarmed to see that everything had gotten dark. Where had Luke gone? Why had he left her?"

"Luke," she called out fearfully. "Please come back. I don't want to be by myself right now. Luke!"

"I'm still here, Luce. I haven't gone anywhere."

"Then why can't I see you?"

"Because you are slipping deeper into your mind where nothing exists. Not even you can exist there for very long."

Lucy wiped her eyes. "How do I find you?"

"Just reach out and grab my hand and I'll pull you back. But you have to make the first move. Come on, Squirt, take my hand."

Despite the fact that she couldn't see him, Lucy blindly stuck her arm out groping for the comfort of his hand in hers. A hand closed around hers and gently pulled her forward.

With a blink of her eye she was back in the spacious white area and Luke was pulling her close. He smiled at her.

"That's my girl. Don't do that to me again, Squirt."

"Why do you call me that?"

"Squirt? I don't know, it just seems like something an older brother would call his little sister. What does Matt call her?"

"Luke, you and I are twins, how can you be older?"

"I was born ten minutes before you. That makes me older, I do believe. Mom and Dad are at the hospital with you now. They're worried about you."

Lucy bit her lower lip. "Luke, you said I couldn't exist very long in that dark realm. What about here? How long can I stay?"

"I don't know. Longer than you could where you were. You can't stay here forever but you are safe for now. Eventually, you'll have to return to reality though."

Lucy shuddered hard. "I don't know if I really want to."

Eric eased onto the waiting room couch next to Mary. She was staring straight ahead, silent tears running down her cheeks. Eric wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. He saw Simon curled up next to Matt asleep and Hank was talking with a nurse at the desk.

"Where are the others?"

"Aunt Julie and Shana took Ruthie and the twins home. Aunt Julie thought someone should be there when both sets of grandparents arrived. How's Lucy?"

He had stepped out earlier to brief them so they knew what her condition was. "No change. They're moving her to a room now. Your mom is with her. Are you okay?"

Mary dabbed her eyes with a crumpled tissue. "No. I just don't understand why this happened. Kevin Cornwall is a great guy. He's the star quarterback and an honor student. His family goes to church.

He's not the type of person who would kill. We have a few students I would have expected it from, the kids that are picked on or who are into role playing games or who worship Satan. But not Kevin."

Eric glanced up at the ceiling for a moment to form his answer before speaking. "Mary, those activities are not what makes someone do something like this. I know everyone blames them but that's because when something like today happens, people need someone to blame. It's easier to blame television or games or the way people dress than to admit the truth. Someone who would go into a school and start shooting without regard to the consequences, well, there is something wrong with that person. It's not fair to place blame anywhere else."

"But Dad..."

"Mary, there was a story in the sports section of today's newspaper about a pro basketball player who was on steroids. Whose fault would say that was, the player's or the NBA's?"

"The player's I guess. Not all basketball players take steroids so it can't be the NBA's fault."

"Exactly. The same thing applies here. Not all kids who are picked on or who game or who, for that matter, delve into the occult end up shooting and killing people. People tend to blame things rather than people because it's easier to believe it could never happened to anyone you know."

"What's going to happen to Tony and the other football players who used paintball guns?" She was still upset at what Tony had done to her and Simon. As mad as she was, however, she couldn't get out of her mind the horrified look on his face when he realized real guns were being used.

Eric shook his head. "I don't know. They were arrested at the school but I don't know whether they'll be charged with anything or not. Even though they used paint ball guns, that is still a serious offense. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes right now."

"I guess now Glen Oak will join the ranks of those other schools where people were killed."

"You're probably right. We're a strong community, Mary; we can get through this as well. Lucy will be fine and we can get on with our lives."

Mary glanced at her father. "Don't tell me we'll all forget this ever happened because I think today will be forever etched in my memory."

Eric rested his cheek on her head. "No, I don't imagine any of us will ever forget today. I don't think it would be wise to even try."

"Mom?"

Annie jumped as Matt touched her arm. She had thought everyone else was asleep. Two hours ago the Colonel and Ruth had shown up at the hospital. After a very tense half-hour, she had convinced them to

take an exhausted Simon back to the house. Matt and Mary had refused to leave but had curled up on the couch to fall into an uneasy sleep. Eric had also dozed off in the straight back chair next to Lucy's bed. Annie had remained awake, sitting on the bed beside Lucy, watching her for some sign of recognition.

"Matt, I thought you were asleep."

"I tried but I couldn't. Why don't you lie down for a little bit? I'll sit up with her."

Annie started to protest but realized she didn't have the energy. Matt noticed. "Mom, all the others are going to need you in the morning whether Lucy is awake or not. Get some rest. I'll wake you if there's any change."

"Promise?"

Matt smiled and nodded. She must be really tired if she was giving up without a fight. He wasn't surprised that she was asleep as soon as she eased onto the couch next to Mary. Matt took his mom's place on the bed and squeezed Lucy's hand.

"Come on, Luce. Wake up. None of us can fault you for not wanting to face what happened but you've really got Mom and Dad worried. I know you are scared. We'll all be scared but there's nothing we can't get through as long as we face it together."

"Luke?" Lucy looked to where her twin was standing a couple of feet away from her. His back was to her and he didn't turn to look at her.

"Yeah, Luce?"

"What's it like to die?"

His shoulders slumped forward. Lucy walked around to face him. His eyes were sad. She bit her lip. "Luke?"

"I can't answer that, Lucy. I never really got a chance to live in order to truly know what it felt like to die. I wish I could have grown up with you. You've had a great life."

Lucy looked away. "Until the last year. I was in a robbery this summer and now this."

"But you had a wonderful family to help you then and they'll help you this time. Go back to them Lucy."

The fifteen-year-old shook her head. "No, I'm not ready. I'm scared, Luke. I used to think Glen Oak was the safest place to be but now everything has changed. I don't think anywhere is safe, except maybe here."

"Things, bad things, happen everywhere but you can't hide from them. Life is about changes; nothing ever stays the same."

"Those are just words to a song, Luke."

He shook his head. "Maybe they are words to a song but it's also the

truth. Are you ready to give up everything just so you can stay in this lonely room?"

"It's not lonely; I have you. I'm finally getting to know the brother I never got to know. I feel safe here with you."

"Lucy, the longer you stay here the harder it will be for you to go back. It's better to go back now before your fears are too great to face."

Lucy turned away and folded her arms across her chest. "What if my fear is already too great? Facing and conquering my fears after the robbery was so hard and nobody even died then. Please I just want to stay here with you. Don't make me go."

He wrapped his arms and held her tight. "I won't make you go, Squirt."

Relieved Lucy turned in his arms and hugged him. For a moment he held her and then he pulled back. In that instant Lucy thought she felt a tear on her forehead from where his head had been. Sure enough, when she looked at him; it was obvious he was crying.

"Luke, what's wrong?"

"I won't make you go, Lucy, but I can't stay here with you either."

Tears formed in her eyes and her heart began to pound. Lucy gripped him tighter. "No, Luke, you can't leave me alone. You can't do this to me. I can't handle being alone just yet."

Luke kissed her forehead and pried his arms free. "Oh, Luce, I don't want to leave but I don't have a choice. I can't stay here with you. But you are never alone, don't you know that? God never leaves you. I'm watching over you. And if you'll just decide to wake up the others will be there for you as well."

He turned to leave but Lucy grabbed his arm. Her eyes were bright with tears and her face splotchy. He sighed. "Luce, I'm glad we had this chance to get to know each other. I love you, Squirt."

He hugged her once more and then he was gone. Lucy sank to the floor, tears streaming down her face. Never had she felt so alone or scared. "Luke!"

She realized he wasn't coming back. Suddenly the room didn't seem so peaceful or as safe as it had. She sank to her knees and put her arms around her legs. "I don't want to go back. But I don't want to be alone."

Matt didn't notice the change in Lucy at first. He had maneuvered about so that he was lying beside her. Therefore he couldn't see her eyes shift from a complete lack of emotion to stark fear and anxiety.

"Luke!" She turned to sit up but found her arms pinned down. Frightened, she pulled harder. This time her left arm still had no give but whatever was holding her right hand moved with her. It took her a long moment to realize someone was holding her hand.

"Lucy, relax, it's Matt. You're safe."

Lucy twisted enough to see that it was indeed Matt next to her on the bed. Relieved not to be alone she tried to hug him but to her consternation found her left hand strapped to the bed.

"Matt?"

"Easy, Luce, I'll unstrap you. The doctor was worried about you pulling your IV out." Quickly and gently, Matt unfastened the strap.

As soon as she was free she hugged her older brother tightly, completely unmindful of the needle in her arm. Matt held her trembling body and carefully straightened her left arm.

"It's okay now, Lucy. You're safe. I'm glad you are awake. Hold on, I'll wake Mom and Dad."

"NO!"

Matt looked at her strangely. "Luce, I promised Mom. They've been worried sick about you."

Lucy blinked back tears. She knew her parents would want to question her or talk about what happened but she wasn't ready to face that. Only her fear of being alone had forced her to make an early return to the real world. "Please, Matt, let them sleep. I don't want... I mean... Just please?"

"Okay, calm down, Lucy. They'll have my hide for this but okay. I won't wake them up." He took one look at the panicky expression on her face and was afraid if he pushed her she would slip away again. "Do you want to talk?"

She shook her head. That was the last thing she wanted to do. "Just hold me where I don't feel like I'm alone while I sleep."

Matt frowned. "Maybe you shouldn't sleep, Lucy. I don't want you to blank out on us again."

"I'm tired Matt. I just want to sleep. Please don't go away like Luke did." Her voice was already showing her exhaustion. Her eyes were getting heavy.

"Lucy, Luke who?" Matt asked. He remembered she had called out for someone named Luke when she first woke up and now she had mentioned him again. Getting no answer he looked down and smiled. She was already asleep. Settling down beside her, his last thought before he too fell asleep was one of surprise. She hadn't even asked if Mary or Simon were all right.

(Author's note: The line "Life's about changes nothing ever stays the same" came from the Patty Loveless song "How Do I Help You Say Goodbye.")

Eric woke with a small groan as the sun filtered into the hospital room. He was getting too old to be sleeping in a chair. He automatically looked to the bed to check on Lucy. At first he was relieved to see her eyes closed as she lay curled up next to Matt.

Then he told himself not to get his hopes up. If she had come out of the catatonic state during the night, Annie or Matt would have awoken him. Her eyes must have closed due to an involuntary reaction.

The hospital door swung open and the Colonel and Annie's dad walked in. Eric rose and motioned for them to remain quiet. He didn't want to disturb the others who were sleeping. He shook hands with his father but Charles hugged him tightly.

"How is she, Eric?"

"The same I guess. I just woke up myself. Where are Mom and Ginger?"

"At your house. As soon as Simon and Ruthie wake up they'll bring them and the twins on."

"Dad?" Annie rubbed her eyes as she sat up. "When did you get here?"

"Our plane got in around midnight. Ginger and I decided it was too late then to try to come by here. How are you doing, Honey?"

"I've been better." Annie glanced over at Lucy. Like Eric she was about to get excited about her eyes being closed. Then she remembered Matt's promise. "She looks better but Matt said he would wake me if there was any change."

"She'll be fine. Now why don't you two run down to the cafeteria and get some breakfast. If I know you two, neither of you have eaten since this whole thing began."

Annie shook her head. "No, I couldn't..."

The Colonel touched her arm. "You can and you will. Both of you, that's an order. Charles and I can keep an eye on things. We'll page you if you are needed."

Knowing it was useless to argue with his father, Eric led Annie from the room. Charles moved to the edge of the bed and brushed his lips against her forehead. To his and the Colonel's surprise, Lucy stirred and opened her eyes.

For just a moment she looked around in fear but relaxed when she saw that she was surrounded by family. "Grandpa, Colonel, what are you doing here?"

"We were worried when we heard what happened."

Lucy's eyes glazed slightly at the barest mention of the shooting. She didn't want to have to face the fact that her favorite teacher and five classmates were dead. But she knew her family well enough to know that the more she tried to avoid talking about it, the more they would push her to do just that. Unless she gave them a real good reason for not talking about it. An idea slowly formed in her brain. She gave them a blank look.

"What happened?"

Matt woke up when he heard Lucy talking. He heard her last question

and frowned. Did she not remember the shooting? Was that why she hadn't asked about Mary and Simon right after she woke up? He looked at the Colonel who was frowning.

"Matt, run down to the cafeteria and get your parents. I'll buzz for the doctor."

In no time at all Matt joined Eric and Annie at their table. They looked up, concerned as he approached. Annie grabbed his arm.

"Lucy?"

"Is awake. Actually she woke up several hours ago but begged me not to wake you. She was tired and went straight to sleep."

Both parents were too relieved to be upset. Eric studied his son carefully. "There's something else isn't there?"

"I don't think she remembers the shooting. She was surprised to see Grandpa and the Colonel. And last night she never even asked if Mary and Simon were all right. The Colonel was getting the doctor when I left."

Their food forgotten, Eric and Annie followed Matt back to Lucy's room. When they got there, Charles was sitting next to a now awake Mary and the Colonel was intently watching as Dr. Shell examined Lucy.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Lucy squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath. She was a horrible liar. Could she pull this off, especially in front of the psychiatrist? She reopened her eyes and saw Eric and Annie enter the room. "Mom! Dad!"

Annie hugged her tightly. Tears filled her eyes. "Oh, Lucy, we were so worried."

"I'm okay, Mom. Please don't cry." She hugged both parents, glad to have the reprieve. She bit her lip. "Mom, Dad, what's going on?"

Annie studied her carefully, pushing a lock of hair away from her daughter's face. She glanced back at the doctor who cleared her throat.

"Lucy, what's the last thing you remember?" She repeated.

"I was in Advanced Psych. Mr. Carlton," she fought hard to keep her voice from catching when she said his name. "Started this video. I couldn't help it but it reminded me of the robbery. I must have totally freaked out because Mr. Carlton sent the rest of the class out. We talked for a few minutes until I calmed down. He suggested that I use the bathroom in his office to wash my face." Her voice faltered and she tried to look confused. "I think I did that but everything is fuzzy after that. Did something happen?"

Lucy forced herself to breathe regularly but she was sure her parents would see past the lie. If they did, would they understand why she

couldn't admit to remembering what happened?"

"Do you know why you are in the hospital?" The doctor gently probed.

Lucy remembered how Luke had described it. "My mind checked out of reality for a while."

The doctor smiled. "That's one way of looking at it. But you seem okay now. I can't think of any reason to keep you here. But I do want to start seeing you again."

Lucy nodded, so far so good. The doctor made a few notes on her chart and looked back at her. "Okay then, let me talk to your parents for a minute and then I'll have the nurse come in and remove that IV. I'll have you home in a couple of hours."

Eric and Annie followed the doctor into the hallway. Dr. Shell folded her arms. "It's not unusual for victims of shock to repress the memory of what put them in shock in the first place. It's a defense mechanism just like the catatonic state was. It's her mind's way of not dealing with the issue. I think that is more likely than the idea that she went into shock before the shooting ever happened but I won't rule out that possibility. I won't know for sure until I meet with her some more."

Eric put a comforting arm around Annie. "What can we do?"

"Take her home, love her, and support her, all the things you normally do. Be especially sensitive to her moods right now. Emotionally she is very fragile right now."

"Should we tell her about the shooting? It will be hard to keep it from her. The television is covering the story almost nonstop and everyone in the community is talking about it."

Dr. Shell pondered the question. "Let's do what we can to avoid her hearing about it. At least for now. If her mind blocked it out, it did so to protect her. She'll eventually remember on her own when her mind thinks she can handle it. If she didn't know about the shooting at all, then I'm afraid telling her would only add to her distress. I see no reason to chance that. I'll give you my beeper number. Page me immediately if there are any problems."

Simon lay on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. He could hear his grandmother and Ginger in the hallway and figured it wouldn't be long before they came in. It felt funny knowing it was a Friday and he wasn't on his way to school. The last thing he had seen on the news the night before was that school was going to be closed at least until Monday and maybe even longer.

As far as he was concerned, he didn't care if school was canceled for the rest of the year. He felt tears fill his eyes. This wasn't fair. He was finally in High School, this was supposed to be his time to shine. He wasn't supposed to have to worry about being shot in his classroom.

The phone rang but someone answered before it rang three times. He wondered if it was about Lucy. A few minutes later someone knocked on his door. He turned on his side before his grandmother entered the

room.

"Simon, are you awake?"

"Yes, mam." He didn't want to turn over and face her; didn't want her to know he'd been crying.

"Matt just called. Lucy woke up. She'll be home in a little while."

Simon tried to wipe his eyes without drawing attention to himself. "She's okay?"

Ruth Camden smiled and sat beside him. "Apparently. Matt was calling from her room so he couldn't say much. What about you? You were pretty quiet all night. How are you handling what happened?"

Simon twisted around until he was looking at her. Her propped up on his arm. "He shot me, Grandma. It was only a paintball but what if it hadn't been?"

Ruth hugged him. "We are all glad it wasn't anything worse. Simon did you know any of the students who died?"

He shook his head. "Not personally. I'd seen a couple of them around school but that's all. But that doesn't make it any easier to take. We've only been in school two weeks, maybe I would have been best friends with some of them. But now I'll never get the chance. It's not fair."

"No, it's not fair. Violence seldom is." She waited a moment for that to sink in. "Oh, Simon, nobody should have to go through what the three of you went through yesterday; what your whole school went through."

"Why didn't God stop it? Isn't he all-powerful? Why didn't he send down a lightening bolt or something and keep this from happening? Was a ordinary football player too much of a match for the Creator of Everything?"

Ruth didn't reply. She simply held her grandson and wondered what she could say to ease his pain. She wondered if there really were any words that could do that.

Lucy closed the bedroom door and sighed. She made it to the bed before she began to shake. Two hours of being home and she was exhausted from trying to perpetuate the lie that she knew nothing about what happened at the school.

She briefly thought about telling everyone the truth but just as quickly dismissed the idea. "It's better this way. Maybe the more I convince them that I have no memory of what happened; I'll manage to convince myself as well."

That line of reasoning didn't have much logic but it was enough to soothe her nerves just a little. If only the Colonel would quit giving her such odd looks, as if he could see past the lie straight to the heart of her fear.

"Lucy?" The door eased open and Matt stuck his head in.

Lucy smiled. "Come on in."

He joined her on the bed and looked at her quizzically. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I wish everyone would quit worrying about me."

"Don't hold our breath. Besides I was desperate. Grandpa and Ginger are still at the movies with Ruthie. Grandma is playing with the twins. Mom and Dad had to run an errand with Mary and Simon." He conveniently left out the fact they had gone to the police station where Mary and Simon could give their statements. He was glad she didn't press him for details. "That left me with the choice of spending time with the Colonel or checking on you."

Lucy wrinkled her nose. "I guess I'm glad I was the more appealing option."

Matt smiled, glad to see her crack a joke. "Lucy, can I ask you a question?"

Her heart skipped a beat but her face showed no reaction. "Sure."

"Who's Luke? You mentioned him twice when you first woke up."

Lucy considered her options. She didn't see any reason why she couldn't tell him about what happened while she was catatonic. "Our brother."

Matt's eyes got wide. "Your twin brother who died while in the hospital?"

Lucy nodded and hugged a pillow close to her chest. "Yeah, I don't know how but he was there with me where ever I was while out of it. He looked like Dad and he... he called me Squirt."

Matt didn't know what to say. So he said nothing and waited for her to continue. She wiped her eyes. "I'm not crazy, Matt, and I didn't imagine him. He told me things I never would have known on my own."

"Like what?"

Lucy bit her lip. How could she tell him without revealing her secret? Then she thought of something. "Like the fact that he was ten minutes older than me? Mom and Dad never told us who was born first but ask them and I bet they tell you it was Luke."

"Okay, Luce, I believe you." Matt assured her but his words lacked sincerity.

Lucy glared at him. "No, you don't. You're just saying that where I won't get upset. Luke was really there and when he left it was like losing him all over again. Only this time it was worse because I'm old enough to realize what's going on."

Matt touched her arm. "Lucy, I'm sorry..."

"Go on and leave me alone, Matt Camden."

Hanging his head, Matt reluctantly did as she said. He was surprised to see Ginger standing in the doorway. She smiled and patted his arm.

"Go on, Matt, I'll talk to her. Your grandfather and Ruthie are downstairs. We brought ice cream for everyone."

Ginger waited a second and then entered Lucy's bedroom. "Hi, Sweetheart, mind if I come in?"

Lucy wiped her eyes. "Actually, I'm not good company right now."

Ginger smiled and sat beside her. "I'll take my chances. I hope you don't mind, but I overheard your conversation with Matt."

"Ginger, no offense but I don't need anyone else humoring me like we used to do Ruthie about Hooey."

"Good, because I have no intention of humoring anyone. Lucy, did Luke seem real to you or did he seem like a dream?"

"He was real."

"Then what does it matter what anyone else thinks? Matt can't understand what you saw because he's never experienced it. I'm going to tell you something that I haven't told anyone since I was younger than you are. Not even Charles knows about this. I had a sister who died when I was ten and she was fifteen. Oh, I loved my sister so much and was devastated by her death."

"How did she die?"

"Leukemia. Back then the success rate for remission wasn't like it is today. I missed her terribly especially those first couple of years. Then my mom got sick, heart trouble. We had to rush her to the hospital; nobody was sure if she was going to live or not. I ran down to the chapel and began to pray. Suddenly, someone was with me. I looked up and it was Janice, my sister. She told me she loved me and missed me. She then told me that she knew how scared I was and that she wanted to let me know Mom was going to be okay."

Lucy watched her intently. "Was she?"

Ginger nodded. "Complete recovery. Janice only stayed a couple of minutes but she gave me such peace of mind. Later, I told everyone about her being there but nobody believed me. They were as convinced that she was a figment of my imagination as I was convinced she was real."

"Have you ever seen her again?"

"No, I never had another reason to. She was there when I needed her the most and she did what I needed her to do; she reassured me when no one else could. Luke did what you needed him to do as well; he was there when the rest of your family couldn't be. Nobody can take that away from you."

Lucy hugged her tightly. "Thanks, Ginger."

"You're welcome, Sweetheart. Now, would you like some ice cream?"

"Sure, let me wash my face and I'll be down."

Annie and Eric followed Mary and Simon into the house. The two kids were quiet after having given their statements. Annie and Eric also felt like they had been through the ringer. For the first time they knew exactly what had happened in that classroom. Knowing how close they had come to losing one or the other child had been terrifying.

Simon, his arms folded across his chest, was obviously in pain. Mary, too, was pale and quiet. Annie, wanting to comfort her children put an arm around Simon and touched Mary's arm. Simon pulled away and ran upstairs. Mary followed him with her eyes.

"I'll go talk with him, Mom."

Annie leaned against Eric as her eldest daughter ran up the stairs after Simon. "We didn't lose any of them to the gunfire and I will forever be grateful for that. But, Eric, I'm afraid we might lose them now in the aftermath. Simon is so angry; Mary is confused, and Lucy..." She gave him a knowing look.

"You noticed too?"

Annie nodded. "We can't push her; I don't know if she's strong enough."

"Annie, we aren't going to accomplish anything right away, we have to give them time. Why don't you go upstairs and lay down for a while, maybe play with the twins. I've got to go the church anyway and meet with Gina Carlton about funeral arrangements."

"I think I will. I'll see you in a little while." She kissed him goodbye. As he left out Lucy came in.

"Hi, Mom, where's Dad going?"

"To meet with someone at the church. How are you?"

Lucy smiled faintly. She was becoming accustomed to the question. "I'm okay. Ruthie and I are about to have a tea party. She's upstairs getting everything ready. You look tired; why don't you steal a nap while the twins are asleep."

Annie caressed Lucy's cheek. "I may just do that. Come on, I'll walk up with you."

Mary stepped into Simon's room and closed the door behind her. "Simon, let's talk."

Simon looked up from his bed and glared at her. "I don't want to talk about it. I've talked about it as long as I want to."

"Sgt. Michaels told us while you were being questioned that the DA was going to recommend probation for Tony and the other players. But

the principal isn't going to let them come back to school. The whole senior line of the football team will be going to Alternative School."

Simon picked up a comic book and angrily flipped through it. "I said I don't want to talk about it. I don't care what happens to them as long as I never have to see any of them."

"Kevin's probably going to be in jail for the rest of his life. I wish he would at least tell everyone why he did it." Mary continued like Simon hadn't said anything.

Simon tossed the comic aside. "What difference does it make? It won't bring back any of the ones who died. It won't heal the ones who got hurt. Why can't you go bug someone else with this stuff."

"Because I want to talk to someone who went through it too. I can't talk to Lucy..."

"Yeah, lucky Lucy. I really envy her right now."

"Simon, how can you say that?"

"Because she doesn't remember what happened. Do you know what I'd give to just block it out? Pretend it never happened? Nobody is on her case about talking about the shooting. I would give anything for that."

"But, eventually she will and it will be even harder for her. Dad himself said we shouldn't forget what happened."

"Look, Mary, before you couldn't stand to be in the same class with me. Why change now?"

Mary opened her mouth to defend herself but realized there was no justification for the way she had treated him.

"You're right. I treated you horribly. I'm sorry. I guess I got a Senior bighead. I never said thanks for what you did. Why did you do it? I certainly hadn't given you any reason to want to help me."

Simon looked at her, his eyes bright. "You're my sister. No matter how you had treated me, I couldn't stand there and let someone hurt you."

"Okay, David, you are nice and dry. Now it's time for you to go to sleep like Sam." Lucy rocked the small baby back and forth as he chewed on his fist. She stifled a yawn of her own. Who knew how exhausting it could be to keep up a lie?

How many times had she conveniently dodged out of a room when someone turned the news on without thinking or started a conversation she wasn't supposed to hear? But somehow, here it was Saturday evening and nobody knew that she was faking the memory loss. She wasn't sure however, how long she could keep up the pretense.

Realizing David was asleep she placed him on his back in his crib and checked on Sam. Satisfied that both babies were asleep she switched on the baby monitor. The rest of the family was downstairs watching a

movie. Lucy had volunteered to put the twins to bed, afraid that the news might inadvertently come on once the tape ran out.

Opening the door to the bedroom, she was surprised to see the Colonel standing there. He gave her a somber look, the closest expression he had to a smile. "There you are Lucy. I wanted to talk to you."

"About what, sir?"

"Your grandmother and I are leaving tomorrow to return home. I'm hoping before then you'll give up this act."

Lucy's heart began to pound. "What act?"

"This nonsense about you not remembering. I admit you had me fooled at first but then I realized you were avoiding the topic as much if not more than we were. If you had no memory you wouldn't be doing that. Now then, everyone is worried sick about you. It's time to give up this charade. We can't help you until you admit that."

Lucy turned away. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"The shooting, Lucy. You were aware of the shooting before you blacked out and now you are lying about it. Why?"

"Because I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't want to wake up, ever. I wanted to stay where I was but he wouldn't let me. If he'd have stayed I would have been okay but it's like he knew if he left I wouldn't stay either. It was the only way I could protect myself. Please don't tell the others."

The Colonel frowned. "I'm sorry, Lucy. Your parents have got to know. Are you going to tell them or am I?"

"She doesn't have to. We already know." Eric and Annie stood in the hallway. Eric's eyes were dark with anger and Annie's jaw rocked. In her hand was the receiver for the baby monitor. They had heard the entire conversation through it.

Lucy stood there shaking. Her eyes filled with tears. She pushed the Colonel away. "I hate you. Why couldn't you just leave things alone?" She pushed past her parents and ran to her room, slamming the door behind her.

"Well, that didn't go the way I had planned..."

"Oh, did you actually have some sort of plan, Dad, or were you just bulldozing your way through another problem? What did you expect to happen? Did you expect Lucy to be relieved or grateful? You should have come to us first."

"I wanted to give Lucy a chance first. Son, I'm sorry you and Annie had to find out this way..."

Eric laughed dryly. "We already knew. We figured it out yesterday afternoon. We even talked with Dr. Shell last night. She agreed that it was better to go along with Lucy for the time being. She cautioned us that if we pushed her right now we might drive her back into her subconscious."

The Colonel at least had the grace to look ashamed. "I had no idea."

Annie shook her head. "So help me, if this has hurt Lucy, I'll... I'll... I just will."

With one last glare, Annie went to check on her daughter. She knocked lightly and entered without waiting for a response. Lucy was curled up on her side on the bed. From the way her body was shaking, it was obvious she was crying.

"Oh Lucy." Annie gathered the distraught girl in her arms and held her close. "It's okay, Sweetie."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to lie but I had no choice."

"Lucy, I first had my doubts when you conveniently fell asleep on the way home yesterday and missed all the police cars and cameras at the school. I knew for sure when we got here and you didn't question why nobody was at school. Your father and I figured you simply needed time to deal with the memory in your own way. We weren't going to question it for now. We decided it was better to have you awake and pretending not to remember than have you in that horrible catatonic state."

Lucy hiccuped. "Why did the Colonel have to mess things up? Why couldn't he have stayed out of it?"

"That's like asking why people breathe air. Lucy, Your father and I are furious with the Colonel for handling it the way he did. But I have a feeling you aren't as mad at him as you are at Luke."

Lucy looked up at her mom, stunned. "How did you know about Luke?"

"Between Matt and Ginger I think I was able to piece the story together. Luke was with you while you were catatonic."

"Yeah, he assured me that Mary and Simon were okay. He didn't want to but I made him tell e about Mr. Carlton and the five students who died."

Annie balked a little. She knew there was no way for Lucy to have found all that out on her own. Was Ginger right and Luke really was there?

"He kept me from going too deep into my mind but he... he..."

"Didn't stay long enough?" Lucy nodded to let her know she was right. "He left and suddenly you were faced with a choice. Stay where you were and be alone or come back and face having to talk about what happened. What a terrible choice to have to make. I know how much you hate to be alone when you are afraid but your mind wasn't ready to deal with the truth. No wonder you chose what you did."

Lucy sniffed. "You're not mad?"

Annie stroked Lucy's hair. "Oh, I'm furious. Furious that Kevin did

this in the first place and upset that the Colonel overstepped his bounds. But I'm not mad at you. But be honest with yourself. You are mad at Luke, aren't you."

Lucy hung her head. "How can I be mad at Luke? He's my twin and he's..."

"Dead? Lucy, at times I get mad at my mom for not being here when I need her. Luke left you when you still needed him and put this awkward situation on you. It's okay to be upset."

"I guess I am mad. I no sooner get to meet him and he's gone again. It's like he knew that if he left I would wake up. Just because he had my best interests at heart doesn't make it hurt any less."

"I know. But for what it's worth, it will be easier to forgive him in time." Annie ran her fingers through her daughter's hair. A maternal yearning to know her son ran through her. "Lucy, tell me about Luke."

"She remembered all along?" Mary stared at her father.

"Yes, but she wasn't ready to face what happened. She and Simon are a lot alike in that respect. Simon is hiding behind his anger while Lucy was hiding behind a memory loss."

Mary narrowed her eyes. "Why do I get the feeling you are trying to tell me something."

Eric couldn't help but smile. "Because I am. Mary, you are a very direct, meet problems head-on kind of person. You want to talk about this, get everything worked out but your brother and sister are going to need some time. Go easy on them and don't push them to talk."

"But you said we shouldn't forget."

"I did and they aren't. But they are going to need to do most of their talking with Dr. Shell. You can to if you want."

At first Mary was about to beg off and insist she didn't need a therapist but then she nodded. "Okay, I'd like that."

"Why do I have to go?" Simon tugged at his tie.

Annie moved his hands away and fixed it properly. "Because your dad is preaching a special sermon and wants his family to be there. Everyone is going."

"Even Lucy?" Ever since the Colonel had confronted Lucy, the fifteen year old hadn't strayed far from her room, afraid that she would either be forced to talk or that she would run into the Colonel.

"Even Lucy. She and your father are getting Sam and David dressed now."

"Fine, I'll go but I won't like it."

Annie sighed. She hoped that soon Simon would stop blaming God for

what happened. "Simon..." She trailed off, knowing she had to give him time.

"Annie?" Ruth Camden stood in the doorway.

"Ruth, good morning. I made pancakes if you want breakfast."

The older woman sat on the couch and looked at her daughter-in-law. "I'll get some in a minute. John and I were talking this morning. Actually I was talking and John was pretending to ignore me. He wants to leave for home before church but I think we should stay until at least after lunch. I want him to apologize to Lucy and to you and Eric."

Annie smiled and sat beside her. "Ruth, Eric and I want you to stay for lunch. Dad and Ginger are leaving tonight as well and we wanted to have a big family meal. But be honest, do you really think the Colonel is going to apologize?"

Ruth sighed. "No, he thinks he did the right thing. And that man, I love him to death, but he can be so stubborn when he's convinced he's right. But still, I think that if I can just get him to go to church with everyone, that will be a start."

"Mom, please, I really want you and Dad there today. I think they'll be some real healing." Eric entered the living room pulling on his coat. He kissed Annie. "I've got to go. Lucy is coming with me."

"Lucy, why?" Annie frowned.

Eric's eyes were red rimmed as he smiled. "You'll see later. Trust me."

"Glen Oak suffered it's darkest day Thursday. Since then, we've all been asking ourselves the same questions. Why? Why those students; why that teacher; why our school?" Eric took a deep breath before he continued.

"The truth is I don't know why anymore than any of you do. But you know, I don't think it would help even if we did. The more important question is how do we begin to heal? We've made an excellent start in the healing process. We're coming together as a community. We're supporting each other. But of course we are doing that. That's what good people do and we are a good community full of good people."

He looked at Annie who smiled at him. "Now, I know what you are thinking. I have to be buttering you up for a reason. After all, if we're such a good community, why did this happen? Why did God let this happen? Why didn't he say 'Stop, this are my people and you can't do that to them.' Well, here it is. We are a good community and this did happen and God didn't stop it. But he didn't let it happen."

Simon, from his seat between Matt and Ruthie shifted uncomfortably. He felt like Eric was speaking directly to him. Stretching her arm across Ruthie, Annie squeezed his knee.

"People say it all the time and books have been written about it. Why do bad things happen to good people? I've been guilty of saying it

myself. I've probably preached a couple of sermons on it in my time here. So I was reading verses trying to come up with some new way of looking at the situation. I found what I was looking for but it wasn't what I expected."

Eric looked around. He was sure he had everyone's attention. "I didn't find one verse that promised a problem free life if we follow Christ. Never one does God say, 'Believe in my son and I will take away your troubles.' Instead I found verses that promised that life wouldn't be easy. Those first disciples were persecuted, ridiculed and yes, even killed."

He let that sink in for a second and then continued. "By now, most of you are probably thinking, 'Thank you Preacher. I could have stayed at home and be depressed. I didn't need your help.' I was feeling the same way as I prepared this sermon. So I turned to Psalms 23, the verse that has been my rock of peace since I was a child. I discovered something in that verse that I had never paid attention to. Listen and see if you catch it."

He flipped his Bible open and found the verse. "'Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil...' Okay, you say, another example that we will have hard times but that's not what I want you to pay attention to. What caught my eye was the word through. Yes, we have trials and yes, problems come but they also go. We only travel through the valley; we never remain. And we are never alone. There's our hope when days like Thursday threaten our foundation, and those days will come. God will help us through these times if only we turn to him. Instead of blaming God, we need to call his name at whatever point in our pain we are. God will then cover us with his love and grace."

Annie glanced at Simon. She wasn't surprised to see him crying but she was glad to see they weren't the hot angry tears he'd been shedding. She motioned for Ruthie to move over beside Mat so she could pull Simon close. She didn't say a word. The important words had already been said.

She glanced up at Eric who gave her a half smile. Then he looked to Lucy and winked. Annie looked over at her middle daughter who was holding Sam. The fifteen-year-old sighed and handed the baby to Julie who was sitting beside her. She wiped her sweaty palms on her denim dress.

Eric continued. "As most of you know, three of my children were in the school Thursday. My family has struggled the last few days to find some meaning to this senseless tragedy. I don't know if we've even come close but we are trying. My daughter Lucy asked me this morning if she could do a special for the closing of today's service. I've agreed to let her. I think it will be a good reminder of what we should do when all this becomes too hard for us to handle on our own. Lucy?"

The rest of the family looked on in surprise as Lucy walked to the front of the church. She was nervous. She'd only had the chance to run through the song a couple of times with the music. Her father handed her a mike and kissed her cheek before sitting behind her. She took a deep breath as the music started.

The song she sang was the old Wes King song "The Robe." It talked

about coming to God with nothing and allowing Him to clothe you with all you needed. It addressed the way she felt at the moment because the shooting had left her feeling very naked without her defenses and she needed God's help in feeling safe once more.

Lucy smiled softly as she finished the song. For a moment nobody said a word, stunned by the beauty of the song and the singer. Then they began to file out of the church. Eric stood and hugged her tightly.

"Beautiful, Luce. Just beautiful."

Annie joined the hug followed closely by the rest of the family. Lucy hugged each of her brothers and sisters, then turned to her Aunt Julie and Hank. After she hugged Charles, Ginger, and Ruth, she looked at the Colonel.

He stood to the edge of the group looking left out. He and Lucy stared at each other for a long minute before Lucy practically flew into his arms. Eric was pretty sure he saw tears in the Colonel's eyes as he wrapped his arms around his granddaughter.

Eric put his arm around Annie and pulled her close. He was pleased to see that even Mary and Simon were hugging each other. "I pray this is the toughest lesson the kids have to learn this school year."

Annie nodded. "So do I. But at least they passed this one."

End
file.